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ABSTRACT

Vocational-technical education was lifted from relative obscurity to a place of prominence in the ongoing debate surrounding school reform. Historically, three major competing policy forces forged vocational education programs--unique needs of the local community, policies and purposes of each state, and overarching goals of federal programs. Commonality of vocational-technical education programs across state and local lines largely derived from 75 years of federal government leadership. A national policy was initially created in response to multiple concerns, including need for a strong work force and shortage of skilled labor. Comprehensive high schools for which educational reformers argued turned out to be comprehensive in name only, with most gradually evolving into the U.S. version of a "dual system." The Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 contained several specific elements, which contributed to the isolation of vocational education from other parts of the comprehensive high school curriculum. In late summer 1990, Congress passed the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act which represented the most significant policy shift in the history of federal involvement in vocational-technical funding. For the first time, emphasis was placed on academic as well as occupational skills. Congress had provided a template for the vocational-technical education portion of the emerging strategy for preparing the work force of the future. (YLB)

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Vocational-technical education has been lifted from relative obscurity to a place of prominence in the ongoing debate surrounding school reform.

Emerging Vocationalism. The 1980s have been characterized by education researchers and policymakers as the decade of reform. Not since the days of Sputnik in the 1950s has the country been so fixated on the quality of education. The publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 energized, mobilized, and gave national focus to the education reform movement in the United States. State efforts focused on the college preparation curriculum with special attention to strengthening graduation requirements, statewide testing, and increasing teacher standards. At the local level, schools increased attendance standards, demanded more homework, and required longer school days and years. Unfortunately, there was little impact on student achievement.

More recently, new kinds of reports have appeared, focusing on occupationally oriented education and particularly the skills required to improve the quality of the work force of the future. The publication of reports such as *America's Choice: High Skills or Low Wages; Workforce 2000*, and reports from the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills have shifted the debate away from a narrowly defined set of "academic abilities" toward a broader array of academic or general competencies, technical and job specific skills, interpersonal abilities, and behavioral traits, including motivation. These reports and the attendant attention given them has lifted vocational-technical education from relative obscurity to a place of prominence in the ongoing debate surrounding school reform.

Vocational Education—Historical Perspective. The United States is a large and complicated society. Its magnitude and complexity are mirrored in its vocational-technical education system, which is *not* comprised of a uniform curriculum and agreed-upon accountability measures. This results partly from a decentralized decision-making structure: decisions about education have historically been considered the province of individual states, rather than of the federal government. State governments, in turn, have delegated much of their responsibility for education policymaking to locally elected school district governing boards. Thus three major competing policy forces have forged vocational education programs as they exist today—the unique needs of the local community, the policies and purposes of each state, and the overarching goals of federal programs.

In vocational-technical education, the commonality of programs across state and local lines, to the degree such commonalty exists, largely derives from 75 years of federal government leadership. The initial creation of a national policy on vocational-technical education was in response to multiple concerns.

In the late summer of 1990, Congress passed new legislation, the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act (Perkins II). For the first time in federal vocational legislation, emphasis was placed on academic as well as occupational skills.

First and foremost, vocational-technical education was seen by the Congress as an integral element in building a strong work force as part of the overall national defense strategy. Additionally, economists decried the shortage of skilled labor. Furthermore, the start of World War I cut off a traditional source of the highest skills—highly skilled artisan immigrants from Europe. Educational reformers responded to these demands by arguing for the establishment of "comprehensive high schools" in which students would learn both theory and practice and in which the dignity of manual work would be valued.

As it turned out, the comprehensive secondary schools of educational reformists' dreams, with very *(continued, page 3)*

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The Changing Role of Vocational-Technical Education *(continued from front page)*

few exceptions, were comprehensive in name only. Most schools gradually evolved into the United States version of a "dual system," consisting of one branch for pupils who planned to enter postsecondary educational institutions and one for students who were preparing for the world of work. Reformers' early fears about separation and stratification were slowly realized.

The Smith-Hughes Act. The Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 was the first vocational education act, and it contained several specific elements which contributed to the isolation of vocational education from other parts of the comprehensive high school curriculum. For example, in order to receive federal funds under Smith-Hughes, each state was required to establish a state board for vocational education. This requirement led, in some states, to the establishment of a board *separate from* the State Board of Education. Thus two separate governance structures could exist at the state level. This in turn fostered the notion of vocational schools as separate and distinct from general secondary schools, and of vocational education as separate from "academic" education. The Smith-Hughes Act tended to promote a segregated curriculum, with Agriculture, Homemaking, and Trade and Industrial Education segments separated not only from "academic" programs, but all other vocational programs as well. The impact of this separation has been felt through subsequent decades in the development of separate teacher training programs, separate teacher organizations, and separate student organizations.

These earlier provisions are now suddenly and dramatically at issue because of the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Act of 1990 (Perkins II).

Perkins II: A Dramatic Change. In the late summer of 1990, Congress passed new legislation, the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act (Perkins II), which represented the most significant policy shift in the history of federal involvement in vocational-technical funding. For the first time in federal vocational legislation, emphasis was placed on academic as well as occupational skills. For the first time, the Act was directed toward "all segments of the population." The Congress, in enacting Perkins II, set the stage for a three-pronged approach to better preparing a highly skilled work force. Perkins II emphasizes:

(1) integration of academic and vocational education;
(2) articulation between segments of education engaged in work force preparation—epitomized by Congressional support for Tech Prep, and
(3) closer linkages between school and work.

All of these changes represent a major shift in the ways vocational-technical education has historically been provided in the United States. Earlier provisions, initiated and promulgated by the Congress and accepted by vocational educators since the days of the Smith -Hughes Act, tended to separate and isolate vocational-technical teachers, students, and curriculum from the rest of the school community.

In addition, there are two more components of the new Act, both marking serious departures from past practice, which deal with funds distribution and accountability. As a result of problems perceived to exist under prior legislation, the Congress, in Perkins II, bypassed state agency decision makers by allocating the vast bulk of the moneys directly to local education agencies, thus removing virtually all distributional discretion from state officials. In addition, the Act explicitly requires states to develop systems of performance measures and standards for secondary and postsecondary vocational education.

Congress has thus provided a template for the vocational-technical education portion of the emerging strategy for preparing the work force of the future. Its three core approaches mark a significant departure from past vocational-technical education acts by emphasizing not the separation and segregation of vocational-technical education by its integration—with academic instruction, between secondary and postsecondary institutions, and with business and labor. The historical separation of vocational and academic education is a powerful barrier to integration and the ultimate success of this new initiative will depend on the willingness of policy makers and practitioners at the federal, state, and local levels to stay the course.

This article is taken from The Changing Role of Vocational and Technical Education in the United States *by Gerald C. Hayward and Charles S. Benson*

National Education Teleconferences

The National Center for Research in Vocational Education is sponsoring two national teleconferences this fall. The first, titled ***"Breaking the Mold: Education Policy,"*** will be on September 22, from 2:00-3:00 p.m. It will feature Secretary of Education Richard Riley; Secretary of Labor Robert Reich; and Associate Director of NCRVE Phyllis Herriage.

The second teleconference is scheduled for 1:30-3:00 p.m. on October 6, on ***"Assessment 2000: An Exhibition."*** It will discuss the design and use of three forms of alternative assessment: performance event, student project/exhibit, and portfolio. Both teleconferences will be televised on C-Band, and sites may register to downlink at no charge. Contact NCRVE at (703) 231-5847.